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Lacking State Funds, Child Passenger Safety Resource Center Closes

Sep-30-2005

After six years of leading the state's efforts to keep kids safe in vehicles, the Child Passenger Safety Resource Center at Eastern Illinois University closed its doors permanently on Friday.

The center was notified in August that its grant from the Illinois Department of Transportation was not being renewed, making Sept. 30 the last day of business.

The Child Passenger Safety Resource Center's two employees, Cathy Kimball and Denise Love, are both taking other positions at EIU, but emotions were running high as the center prepared to close.

"If I have made a difference in the life of just one child, then all my efforts have been worthwhile," Kimball said, with emotion stalling her words.

It is likely that her efforts to promote proper use of children's car seats have impacted far more than one child.

As Illinois child passenger safety coordinator, Kimball provided resources for technicians and the general public throughout the state, and even sometimes from outside of the state's borders.

Kimball has been with the state's program since its inception. While working in EIU's Office of Safety Programs in 1998, Kimball voluntarily attended Illinois' very first training program to become a certified child passenger safety technician.

When IDOT formed its Child Passenger Safety Resource Center in 2000, Kimball was hired as the statewide coordinator, and the center was placed in Charleston under the administrative direction of EIU.

Kimball took seriously the responsibility of keeping the public informed of new safety information, as the child-seat industry has seen many recent changes.

The center coordinated training for about 3,000 technicians, with about half of those keeping their certification current.

Those technicians periodically conducted free checks of children's car seats throughout the state in an attempt to lower the number of injuries and deaths that occur in accidents when children are improperly restrained.

When the center opened six years ago, motor vehicle crashes were the leading cause of death for ages 0 to 34 in the nation, Kimball said. Now, crashes are no longer the leading cause of death for children through age 3.

"I think Cathy has done a tremendous job in getting the word out about child passenger safety," said Becky Markwell, director of the EIU Office of Safety Programs, under which the center was operated. "I know they've done a wonderful job of raising the level of compliance in Illinois."

The center's activities included organizing three statewide conferences, helping with conferences for other agencies such as Head Start, helping form the Coles County Safe Kids Coalition at Sarah Bush Lincoln Health Center and coordinating training classes for people to become certified in the area and throughout the state.

In addition, Kimball recently served on the National Task Force for Child Safety, which met in Washington, D.C.

"They look at Illinois as having one of the top programs in the country," Kimball said.

The center also coordinated team concepts in communities to bring together emergency personnel to "take on child passenger safety as their issue," Kimball said.

Kimball hopes that her work will continue on in the thousands of technicians who have previously been trained, even if it means working as volunteers. That's what she plans to do.

The safety focus of the program will continue in a different format, said IDOT employee Jahari Piersol.

Instead of having three regional child passenger safety coordinators, IDOT will now have seven regional occupant protection coordinators, which will focus on vehicle safety for all ages, not just children.

EIU had received an IDOT grant of around \$200,000 each year for the Child Passenger Safety Resource Center, Markwell said.